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HAS TECHNO DECELERATED? ON TECHNOCULTURE, ACCELERATION AND BREAKS

NONMUSIC   ACCELERATION, BREAKS, FEATURED, NON–MUSIC, SPEED, TECHNO, TECHNO DECELERATIONISM, TECHNOCULTURE, TEXTURE

Reflecting on the last thirty years of techno music, I am not alone thinking that it has decelerated. By deceleration, I mean that since the 1980s the beat per minutes of techno music – which varies, usually, between 120 and 160 bpm – slowed in pace. Techno has become somehow more reflective, more cerebral.

When I argue that techno music has decelerated I also mean a second, perhaps more important, thing: technoculture[i], of which techno music is a socio-cultural collective expression, has decelerated too. But what does "decelerated technoculture" mean?

If we took seriously the link between techno music and technoculture, as Hillegonda Rietveld argued for the past years in her analysis of dance cultures, it is possible to assert that through electronic music we experience the current norms, values and sociality that are shaped by the development of technologies. If technologies accelerate or decelerate, we'll hear it in music trends. This is, for instance, what happened with the rise of post-rave music in the UK.

"*Around 2004, while digital networks increased information flows to non-human processing speeds, genres such as dubstep seemed to take an opposite trajectory to acceleration by stripping out the accelerated breakbeats of drum 'n' bass, and emphasizing its defiantly dragging high-volume sub-bass.*"[ii]

In other words, if electronic music arises when globalisation accelerate social relations, an argument usually accepted among scholars of dance cultures, my argument is that today's Western techno music scenes show that technoculture has taken a slow U-turn. In this post, I will try to articulate whether this is a desirable phenomenon or not, from an emancipatory perspective.

Technoculture, automated behaviours, and breaks

My points of departure to answer whether techno has decelerated and whether this process is desirable or not from an emancipatory perspective are two: 1) the acknowledgement that our connection with the cyberspace is becoming more problematic and 2) that techno music scenes understood and reflected on this process by making techno music more cerebral. By cerebral, I refer to the mix between

dance music and the theoretical discussions about it, or the mix of talks, images and other forms of art that you can observe and engage with in many "cerebral" electronic festivals. In these global events, machinic sounds, visual art and conferences are combined together to offer an overview of the potential and limits of electronic music (think about ADE or Transmediale, just to name a few).

We often hear that the problematic link with the cyberspace, once celebrated as a space for liberation, is exemplified by the realization that affects and emotions are used by the same algorithms that corporations install to control social media platforms in order to shape networks and online markets. It is not unlikely that one day dance floors will be directly linked to a techno server, sending data on how bodies interact with specific types of music and spaces, to boost consumption inside and outside clubs. Thus, in a controlled cyberspace, we already find ourselves trapped in the bubble that constitutes our feeds. Nonetheless, if we don't enter the bubble (or the dance floor), we tend to think that we are unreachable and ultimately disconnected with the social.

These fears of being disconnected remind me often of addictions. For instance, let's think of the addiction we have with internet and social media. I want to break from this addiction yet a few days ago I stayed up late at night watching videos of the chef Gordon Ramsey yelling at owners of restaurants for being dirty and unprofessional. The morning after I woke up tired: why was I watching these videos? How can I stop losing sleep like that? Clearly – I thought – I might suffer from an internet addiction. I want to quit but I don't know how. Sometimes it's stronger than me.

With this in mind, I want to make sense of the expression "unlearning automated behaviours" (and how to break with them) in the context of electronic music, and considering that, the way in which we experience techno music is a form of ritual in which behaviours resemble a type of *collective automation* that is influenced by present technocultures.

We dance to repetitive beats and we dance for hours, yet we know that this is a form of rupture with different things that trap our everyday life: breaking with gender norms, breaking with office jobs, breaking with X, Y and Z. However, this ritualised moment of dancing to techno beats is also a way to adapt to our hyper-technological society, mimicking the automation we experience at work, on social media and in other forms of social relations that shape our present.

Of all aspects of technoculture that we can analyse, however, I want to focus on the term acceleration, because this term has been deployed to indicate different configurations of liberation from oppressive structures and a highly technological capitalism at the foundation of a controlled cyberspace. I will do so by trying to answer the starting question of this post (has techno decelerated? If yes, why?), and, more decisively, by understanding the link between speed, automated behaviours and the trajectories of a technologically-led capitalism.

I will now start to answer these questions by first looking at how acceleration is linked to techno music; I will then ask whether acceleration or deceleration are emancipatory and hence desirable from a libertarian perspective. Finally, I will ask whether techno is in fact decelerating and going back to my first concern: can deceleration break with automated behaviours and, as a consequence, with the negative consequences of the occupation of technologically-led capitalism into cyberspace?

Techno Music and Globalization

Through a brutal oversimplification of the historical tendencies of electronic music dance cultures, I suggest understanding how techno music is linked with globalisation by looking at the development of its spaces.

- First phase of techno (expansive phase of globalisation): Discos, Clubs, Raves, Parades.

- Second phase of techno (depressive phase of globalisation, crisis/austerity): Post-rave, Festivals, Clubs, Boiler Room.

If we take seriously what we said before, one cannot fail to notice that this evolution follows the dynamics of globalisation. In the expansive phase of globalisation, techno was accelerating and took some forms of libertarianism. Then, at the turn of the millennium, with the end of raves and the emergence of post-rave culture, we started to witness a slow deceleration and almost a cerebral turn: we write about a confined techno scene and we mourn raves. Yet, we also discuss a lot about it and we combine music with art performances.

Which phase is better? I am not so interested in this question. As often happens, we can find power dynamics everywhere and anytime. What I would like to do is, instead, to analyse and speculate about the different techno-politics at play in the techno music scenes. In order to do so, it is important to understand what acceleration (and speed) have to do with techno music and technoculture.

Acceleration, Techno and Politics

Accelerationism is a term that has been used to indicate that fragments in Nietzsche, Marx, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that an acceleration of capitalist forces, of which technology is one of them, is somewhat desirable to overcome capitalist modes of production and reproduction. Under this framework, techno music and its fast and repetitive beats can be understood as a positive response to this acceleration of capitalism.

A year ago, in a post published on *non.copyriot.com*, the author of *Malign Velocities* Benjamin Noys suggested that Detroit Techno, the genre of techno linked to the once industrial giant city, is tied with the destiny of its accelerated future. If global industrialization is responsible for climate change, and climate change will bring a new glaciation that will ultimately destroy human existence on this planet, Detroit Techno is the sound of a future glaciation. In other words, techno music expresses the negative consequences of the development of technologies for the ecology: the "nature" of the sound of Detroit Techno is cold, even glacial.[iii]

Noys discusses that this tendency can be already found in the cold melodies of the machines, as the technoculture of Detroit Techno hides the "becoming-cold" of its future, summarised in the negative effects brought by hi-tech globalisation. While fascinating, I suspect that producers like Mike Banks, founder of the Detroit-based collective Underground Resistance (UR), would disagree. UR's techno, I argue, remains very heated. UR's jazz sounds are striving to have a positive impact on the communities in which techno generated. If anything, as two UR's recent videos show, Detroit Techno desires a break with the structural racism of the US, which is responsible, as an example, for the water crisis in Flint, Michigan.[iv] More historically, and looking at other important productions, UR's music and politics lie between a very contingent dilemma and a temporal dialectic between its past and the future. On the one hand, there is the cosmology of its mythological past, brought by the Aztec people, which celebrate an alternative radical history of the Americas.[v] On the other hand, UR has to dream about an (afro-)future in which *resistance* can win over the malign forces of the cyberspace.[vi]

What Detroit Techno signifies in political terms can refer to alternative ways of understanding music and politics. Here I suggest two key aspects that can serve to answer the questions raised previously: 1) when we make connections between music and politics, it is important to contextualise socio-cultural phenomena (such as techno music), by not escaping what creators think and say about their own production; 2) thinking about the relationship between music and politics, and between techno music and technoculture, we can immediately distinguish different politics at play. These, in turn, suggest (often opposite) visions of the role and future of new technologies.

It is here, in these differences, that we can extricate political temperatures and contrasting political views on the development, nature and destiny of technology. Let's look, therefore, at the different perspectives on acceleration and speed.

Left Accelerationism (l/acc)

Is accelerationism desirable from an emancipatory perspective? A particular declination of the accelerationist discourse is the so-called l/acc, famously brought together by Srnicek and Williams. They argue that we must accelerate the end of capitalism, that we should accept the development of technologies, and use them in our favour. Automation can be a good mechanism if it is seen as a form of cyborg socialism that can alleviate us from work.

When we think about electronic music, it is also undeniable that techno had its accelerated and libertarian tendencies. The free Tekno rave parties that spread across Europe, inspired by temporary autonomous anarchism, loved 180 bpm hardcore, speedcore and a free internet culture. In that l/acceleration, there was a moment of temporary freedom.

Things, however, changed, and despite a cyberpunk spirit will continue to be rebellious, the subjects that sustain various anti-capitalist struggles (ravers, precarious workers, students, ecologists) will always have to modify tactics and strategies according to the way in which capitalism changes.

Right Accelerationism (r/acc)

Another perspective, r/acc, draws its theoretical framework from its most famous thinker, Nick Land (whereas he would reject this label). The now infamous Nick Land, once the teacher of, among others, Mark Fisher, ended up advocating fascism, a bit like the first fascist futurists of the 20th century.

In a guide to accelerationism for the alt-right platform jacobite, Land writes: "In socio-historical terms, the line of deterritorialization corresponds to uncompensated capitalism. The basic – and, of course, to some real highly consequential degree actually installed – schema is a positive feedback circuit, within which commercialization and industrialization mutually excite each other in a runaway process, from which modernity draws its gradient. Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche were among those to capture important aspects of the trend. As the circuit is incrementally closed, or intensified, it exhibits ever greater autonomy, or automation. It becomes more tightly auto-productive (which is only what 'positive feedback' already says). Because it appeals to nothing beyond itself, it is inherently nihilistic."[vii]

More recently, confirming how dangerous the post-politics discourse can be, especially when it is invoked together with an automated techno-anarchism, Land puts it very simply: "Because the word 'fascism' has been so ruined by incontinent polemical usage, it is difficult to employ without apparent rhetorical over-reach. This is unfortunate, because in its cold, technical sense, the word is not even merely convenient, but even invaluable. It literally means the politics of bundling. Fasces are sticks bound together. Liberals are essentially defined by their dissent from that."[viii]

For Land, the dissolution of other people's subjectivity in favour of a controlled mass is appealing. A typical fascist trait! Is there a type of techno music for r/acc? Nazi-electronic dance music does exist in its vaporware variations.[ix]

It indicates, in my view, that the speed of music *per se* can't tell us much of the content of techno. Speed (of techno music) and acceleration (of technoculture) can't tell us alone the type of techno-politics at play. At the same time, it would be wrong to insinuate that techno-politics is neutral. This is, perhaps, the case of those who argue in favour of an unconditional accelerationism.

Unconditional Accelerationism (u/acc)

Another thinker who is becoming increasingly problematic for his post-politics views and its proximity with the discourses of the alt-right is Edmund Berger, who argues that "one of the major points of contention concerning unconditional accelerationism (henceforth U/ACC) is a

perceived slight or rejection of any 'positive' form of political activity or organizing."[x]

This anti-praxis form of accelerationism sees technology as an autonomous and neutral or non-oriented social machine that "eats out" agency in its favour. Agency and politics are seen too weak to intervene in the course and history of capitalism. The consequence? A technocratic vision where protests and struggles don't play any role.

Those who argue that technics is neutral assume, not paradoxically, that its opposite is also true, that social biology is political. A sentence that could end up being used by the very racists; and a false claim, of course. But one thing is evident. The techno music scene if full of unconditional accelerationists, beyond l/acc and r/acc, beyond, in other words, a positive (or negative) position in the techno landscape.

What I argue, instead, is the importance of listening to the diversity of techno genres and of exploring the variety of the techno scenes. It is here, in the profoundly different visions of techno that politics emerge. Nazi-EDM is so distant from the emancipatory practices of left-clubs in Germany. Commercial festivals are so different from autonomous free Tekno raves.

Against Accelerationism

Given these premises, it does not come as a surprise that many on the left have argued against accelerationism. Reid Kane puts it simply: "the development of the productive forces comes into conflict with the existing relations of production. Wage workers, displaced by machinery, are proletarianized, deprived of access to the means of subsistence they collectively produce. It was precisely this tendency that Marx saw 'accelerating' with the completion of the bourgeois revolutions. Yet he did not advocate it simply because it led to technological advancement, but because it forced the proletariat to organize itself to mediate the deprivation they faced."[xi]

A strong collective organisation is precisely what technocrats want to eliminate. See, for instance, what is happening in France, where unions are still strong, and they are seen as a threat to a frictionless market.

If we think about music, a position against accelerationism would not make a lot of sense. The art of making music and conveying messages with it. Again, a useful point of reference is Burial's music and its impatience with the disappearance of raves. But these are the social conditions in which his ideas emerge, and his music elaborates this mourning. *Burial's ambient music is anything but acceleration. It is perhaps its funeral.*

Techno Decelerationism?

So: is a deceleration in techno music plausible, rebellious or desirable? Is decelerationism right-wing, left-wing or non-oriented? To answer this question, it is useful to refer to the discourses that emerged around the growth/de-growth debate.

Serge Latouche, a key figure of the de-growth movement, argues in favour of a complete rejection of growth, technology and urban modern life. Instead, we should create, he insisted, convivial villages. The de-growth discourse had some success in the previous decade, especially before the crisis and the austerity measures imposed in Southern Europe. De-growth opposed the dogma of infinite progress that technocrats spread and, pushed at its philosophical boundaries, Latouche's horizon rejects technics for beings.

However, critics of de-growth pointed out that living a countryside lifestyle is far from being a synonym of freedom. It is by coming to the city that we break from the conservative norms of the country. Thinking about deceleration, a regionalisation of politics that can combine progressive technology and a green life is desirable. But looking at the development of estate capitalism, we know that gentrification is not only an urban process; it is happening everywhere, also in rural towns. Think about glamorous camping or "glamping" and other similar examples.

Let's finally look at deceleration and techno. I assumed before that after the crisis and with the end of raves, we witnessed a new process: techno becomes more cerebral, we think more about it, we spend less time dancing at a club than at a rave and we had to reflect more on its politics. An example and outcome of this slower and more cerebral scene is the success of Boiler Room, which brings short, online DJ/VJ sets to our computers, leaving our bodies still and uncomfortable on our chairs. To put it differently, if acceleration brought us Boiler Room, if it caused a decelerated techno that we are seeking to understand…perhaps the answer lies elsewhere, outside the line of argument which ties speed with acceleration.

Beyond Speed. On Texture and (Anti-)Systemic Abstractions

My argument can be summarised as follows: instead of focusing on acceleration or deceleration, it's better to look somewhere else. Firstly, because whether something is desirable politically from an emancipatory perspective must take into account what are the consequences on marginalised groups, as many contemporary techno collectives remind us.

Secondly, as described earlier, different visions of the future of technology that are at play in techno scenes correspond to different techno-politics. We know that a night at a social centre or a squat is really different from an event organised and promoted by absolute vodka, even though the music might sound similar. But if you observe the crowd, the prices, the door policy, the security, the bar, and the mix…you have two very different experiences. A social and spatial analysis opens up more questions than the secure answers that speed-politics offer.

Finally, if speed might not be, alone, what can ultimately explain the link and the desirability of an accelerated technoculture, can we think

about another term? I suggest turning to the term *texture*.

In music, the texture is the overall quality of the different elements of a composition: when we produce music, we consider altogether its tempo, the melody and the harmony. It is by listening to a DJ set or a mix as a whole that we can deeply connect with the various musical materials and their poetics. The texture shows us precisely the breaks, the movements and the rhythms. It gives space to the different voices of a composition. On the contrary, speed *per se* does not tell us much about the context and the message of a piece. Even when we look only at the tempo of a composition ("allegro", "presto", etc.) we must have a holistic understanding of the entire piece.

Finally. What does texture have to do with technoculture? Going back to the thought of Marx, Nietzsche, Deleuze and Guattari, those radical philosophers often misquoted by r/acc and u/acc accelerationists, it is important to have an (anti-)systemic approach to politics, technology and music.

What I mean with this statement is that it is only when we look at a music scene as a broader geography, when we understand capitalism as a historical process, when we theorise subjects as a multiple and inter-connected body, that we can understand the granularity of the co-evolution between people and technologies.

Breaking with sexism in clubs, breaking with the boundaries imposed by commercial music festivals, breaking with oppressive security apparatuses, and breaking, to conclude, with automated behaviours, need a systematic understanding of spaces and cultures.

If we extrapolate techno music from its subjects and if we de-contextualise technocultures isolating parts of their elements, the risk it is to use and impoverish the experiences of others, which is a sign of disconnection from politics that result into a celebration of our already inflated informational bubble.

When it comes to the speculation over the future of techno and technoculture, a focus on subjects and contexts gives in turn a better depiction of how people and marginalised groups experience changing social relations. This is only a starting point, and an effort to push back those transcendental visions that often participate to the "accelerationist fashion" into the joy and immanence of dancing to techno music.

Far from arguing in favour of a deterministic or relativist approach to techno music and technoculture, texture can help us make sense of the different trajectories of the techno scene. It might be true that techno scenes share a positive vision of the future, in which technoculture is the result of an artistic process (techno here goes back to the Greek meaning of *techne*: the process of making art). And it might be true that the tendency of capitalism is to make itself autonomous, via a system of machines. But if this is the case, can't we consciously dream of new (sonic) worlds instead of offering ourselves to the (sound) system?[xii]

i See, for instance, Shaw, Debra Benita. *Technoculture: The key concepts*. Berg, 2008.

ii Rietveld, Hillegonda. "Machinic Possession: Dancing to Repetitive Beats" in Julien, O. and Leveaux, C. (eds.) *Over and Over: Exploring Repetition in Popular Music*. Bloomsbury, 2018. p. 86.

iii https://non-milleplateaux.de/dead-detroit-lies-dreaming-techno-anti-accelerationism/

iv See Underground Resistance's official videos "DOOKIE MACHINE" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLSldlKlnIk and "VINTAGE FUTURE" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpJkN6PUb9Y

v The Aztec Mystic aka DJ Rolando. *The Night of the Jaguar*. Vinyl, 12″, 33 ⅓ RPM, EP. UR-049. US: Underground Resistance, 1999.

vi Underground Resistance. *Electronic Warfare*. Vinyl, 12″, 33 ⅓ RPM, EP. UR-033. US: Underground Resistance, 1995.

vii https://jacobitemag.com/2017/05/25/a-quick-and-dirty-introduction-to-accelerationism/

viii https://jacobitemag.com/2017/08/11/psycho-politics/

ix Here is an example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-elGtsU1Ng

x https://deterritorialinvestigations.wordpress.com/2017/03/29/unconditional-acceleration-and-the-question-of-praxis-some-preliminary-thoughts/

xi http://www.metamute.org/editorial/your-posts/against-accelerationism-%E2%80%93-marxism

xii Dopplereffekt // Objekt. *Hypnagogia*. Vinyl, 12″, 45 RPM. LSR014. Germany: Leisure System, 2014.

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